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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 001717

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PINR TU

SUBJECT: FM DAVUTOGLU: YES, WE ARE THE NEW OTTOMANS

REF: A. ANKARA 1688

1B. ANKARA 1618

1C. ANKARA 1651

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady, for reasons 1.4(b,d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In a recent speech before the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) retreat, Turkey's Foreign Minister Davutoglu appeared to embrace the concept of Neo-Ottomanism as a framework for Turkish foreign policy. Though Davutoglu and the MFA have tried to step back from the statement (which they insist was taken out of context), the concept reinforces Turkey's aspirations to re-engage estranged neighbors and to serve as mediator in conflicts in the Middle East and the Balkans -- particularly coming so soon after Davutoglu's Sarajevo speech, which raised some hackles in the region. It also leaves AKP open to criticisms of "creeping" Islamization, naivete, and anti-Westernism.
END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Twice yearly, AKP party leaders and members of parliament meet at Kizilcahamam for a consultative retreat to go over party policies and the state of Turkey in a relaxed, informal environment. At the most recent retreat, held November 21 and 22, FM Davutoglu co-opted his critics' derisive term for his personalized foreign policy, saying, "Yes, we are the New Ottomans." In so doing, he made coherent the past six years of Turkish foreign policy, which has seen an intensive interest in being part of peace negotiations stretching from Bosnia through Palestine to Afghanistan, the opening of embassies throughout much of Africa, and rapprochement with previous rivals, such as Iran, Syria, and Armenia.

¶3. (C) Davutoglu had previously hinted at such a policy in a speech made in Sarajevo on October 16, in which he envisioned an economically and culturally integrated Balkans and Middle East as the driver of a peaceful, affluent civilization, and not the crisis-ridden periphery it is perceived to be today. In his estimation, the Ottoman Empire is the "only positive exception" to have created such an entity, and Turkey, as successor to the Ottoman state, should be the focus of the re-establishment of a strong Eastern Mediterranean. Turkey's relative power, stability, and affluence would allow it to recreate what Davutoglu sees as fundamental to a strong, self-assured political environment: cultural integration, economic interaction, and political authority.

¶4. (C) Davutoglu and the MFA have both tried to distance themselves from the concept of Neo-Ottomanism, claiming that the press reported his statement entirely out of context. Nonetheless, the term roughly coincides with Davutoglu's

world-view and adds an academic and ideological backbone to his pragmatic "zero problems with neighbors" policy. It trades on common historical and cultural traits among the countries in Turkey's larger neighborhood to form the basis for closer cooperation rather than conflict. The theory conveniently justifies why Turkey -- as a comparatively stable, democratic, affluent country -- should serve as the anchor for such a geopolitical alignment.

¶ 15. (C) Borrowing from Western rhetoric that Turkey is a bridge between the East and the West, Turkey is aspiring to broaden its horizons to include not just Europe but the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia in its strategic considerations as well. The policy also attempts to promote two popular trains of thought among conservative Turkish intellectuals: the concepts of a global Islamic solidarity (previously promoted by former Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan) and the concept of a Turkish-Islamist synthesis (popular in nationalist circles and also among members of the Fethullah Gulen religious community).

¶ 16. (C) AKP's domestic detractors, however, see the policy as more evidence of Turkish society slowly turning away from the West; embracing regional autocrats, such as Bashar al-Assad, Mahmud Ahmedinejad, and Omar al-Bashir; and Islamization of the populace as part of their plan to one day install Sharia law "overnight." Turkey's choice of regional friends does at times highlight its religious outlook more than cultural ones: estranging historical trade and military partner Israel over the Gaza crisis sits unsteadily when Turkey comes to Sudan's defense. But Turkey does not only seek friendship

ANKARA 00001717 002 OF 002

with Muslim countries, as its recent outreach to Armenia and Serbia underscores. Still, individual players in the region may have reason to be skeptical of Turkish motives, be it because of geopolitical rivalry (Egypt and Iran), historically-based distrust (Armenia, Serbia, and Cyprus), or the perception of being unfairly treated (Israel).

JEFFREY

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